

禪

# CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 57 November, 1986

CHANGE AND CHANGELESSNESS  
(Lecture given Sunday, Nov. 24, 1985  
by Master Sheng-Yen)

There is a story of a king called Prasenajit who was 62 years old. He talked to the Buddha, telling him how old he realized he'd become. "I'm getting older not only year after year, but month after month, second after second." And the Buddha asked him, "So you have seen impermanence, but have you seen what is permanent?" The king was unable to answer, so the Buddha said, "Let me give you an example. Do you see the water of the Ganges? How long have you seen it? Was the water that you saw when you were three years old different from the water that you see now?" When the king told him that the water was still the same, the Buddha said, "All external phenomena are in a state of change, that's true, but the nature of that which is changing is unchanging."

All of us are in the process of growing old, but we generally aren't aware of it. From the ages of 10 through 20 there are changes; from the ages of 20 through 30 there are changes - and so on. When we have finally grown old, we will realize that we have gone through many stages.

There are two very painful times in a person's life: separation from a loved one who is still alive, and separation from one who has died. It can actually be more traumatic to be parted from those who are still alive, because when a person is dead there is nothing more that can be done; most likely after the initial suffering it will be understood that it's useless to go on bearing the grief. But in both cases there is still a great deal of pain.

Most people are afraid of death. They wonder if when they die, they will continue to exist. Even those who believe in future lives are distressed by the idea of death, because they cannot be sure that they will be reunited with the ones they love.

There is a Chinese novel called "Dream of the Red Chamber" in which the main character sees a peach tree lose its blossoms when they are at the peak of their beauty. She reflects that human life is also like this - just when people are at their peak, they die. As the blossoms fell, she cried and prepared a burial for them. She thought about her own death and wondered who would bury her. She reflected that there was parting, separation and death; that was all.



On the same subject of impermanence there is a poem, written in the Tung Dynasty by Pai-Chou, called "Grass":

"Abundant grass growing in a plain  
Every year it flourishes and withers.  
It's so abundant that even a wild fire  
can't burn it all;

In the following spring it appears again."

The difference between the young woman in the novel and the musing of this poet is that while the former sees only the decay of things, of impermanence, the poet expresses an understanding of a cycle of renewal; he sees that although there is a withering, there is also another flourishing. This is a Taoist thought. And because he speaks of causes and conditions, it is Buddhist as well. All things come together because of causes in the past that disperse and come together again. Within existence there is emptiness and within emptiness there is existence. The poet is not despondent over impermanence; he just notes the changes.

In the Surangama sutra it is said that all things are in a state of change. But what is it that is not changing? The water that King Prasenjit insists is the same is really unchanged in name only. The water that someone can bring back from the Ganges today is definitely not the same water that the king saw.

There are philosophers and theologians who will argue that there is some changeless substance in the universe, or a great being such as God. This is not the experience, however, of the Buddha.

The changelessness of the Buddha-nature permeates all things. It is eternal but it is not outside of phenomena. There is no basic "substance"; there is no extra entity called "God".

Another poem from the Tung Dynasty runs:

"A year ago today in this doorway  
there was a girl and peach blossoms.  
Both were shining, red and beautiful.  
Today, this year, the girl is gone -  
But the peach blossoms are here."

One year the peach blossoms gave the poet great happiness, and another they brought sadness. What the poem is really saying is that although nature doesn't change, people's feelings do.

The point of all this lies in the fact that vexation is just superfluous. The natural world is always in a state of change; it is a constant arising and passing away. If we understand this, we should not feel pleasure when something comes into existence, or is born, and we should not feel despondent by something dying. We shouldn't feel joy upon acquiring something good, nor feel depressed when experiencing a loss.

Once when I was in Tokyo, I made arrangements with friends to take a train ride. This train always goes the same route and encircles the city. When I arrived at the station, one of my friends still hadn't showed up. Someone suggested that we go on without him, but another person objected, saying, "But what if he has gone on ahead?" I said, "It doesn't matter. The train always comes around again."

As far as change is concerned, we really can't know what things will turn into. We can't clearly predict the future. But there is one principle we can be sure of: what we are related to now, we will have relationships to later.

Everyone has probably had the experience of feeling that they've known someone before, even though they've just met them. This is probably a case of being acquainted with that person in a previous life; they may have been family members or close friends.



previous life; they may have been a family member or a close friend.

There are people who have the attitude that when they get into a situation that's bad for them, they will do their best to try to escape from it.

There was an artist from Taiwan who felt it wasn't safe there, so he moved to the United States. Some time later he was travelling in Florida and died in a car accident.

In another account, a man was told by a fortune teller that he was going to drown. So he played it safe and stayed at home. Three days later he died as he was washing his face.

Sometimes nearly impossible events as the above do happen. At any rate, what you are fated to meet, you will meet. Within the changeless there is change. If the person who was told that he was going to drown had gone out one of those days, he might indeed have died in a river or pond - but according to his circumstances it occurred at home.

Causes are always changing and effects are always changing, but the principle of cause and effect remains the same - it is permanent. Things are constantly being born and passing away. But for an unenlightened person what is permanent is just this passing away. The vexations of ordinary beings stem from not being clear about change and changelessness.

Not only are people changing physically, but mentally they are also going through changes. A person may be born poor and become rich - or start out rich and end up poor. An uneducated person can be educated; a low, mean character can be transformed into a sterling character. We are all in a perpetual state of change. If we aren't getting better, then we're getting worse. But there is one thing that is changeless and that is our self-nature. Even the worst kind of person will, in the end, repent; it was simply his personality at the time that drove him to his actions.

Most people hope for a future life. They are not fully convinced that they will have one - but they still hope. They think that the change will be just a new face with the same benefits. This is a selfish attitude and will only lead to vexation.

A person who is liberated, on the other hand, is changeless. You could say that there is nowhere that is not his body, no place that he definitely is, and no place that he definitely is not. He is everywhere, with no fixed spot. This is real freedom, true liberation.



\*\*\*\*\*NEWS ITEMS\*\*\*\*\*

Shih-fu has arrived back in New York and with him, the "old" Kaiser Truong has returned also. He is now Guo-Yeun Shih. We welcome him and congratulate him once again.

The next beginner's Meditation class will be held on Sat, Dec 6, 1986. 9:00-5:00. The cost is \$40. If you are interested please contact the Center. (718 592-6593)

The retreat schedule is as follows: #1 Thanksgiving Retreat, Thurs. Nov 27, 1986 at 7:00 PM to Thurs. Dec 4th. #2 Christmas Retreat Thurs Dec 25, 1986 7:00PM to Thurs. Jan 1, 1987. The cost is \$60 for members and \$120 for non-members. Please register as soon as possible.

Weekend sitting are held every first weekend of the month. Please contact the Center if you are planning to attend.

Tuesday night meditation and Sunday open-house activities are held as usual.

On October 26, 1986 a staff meeting was held and the final preparations are being made to publish three books within the next few months.

On October 25, 1986 a beginner's class was held and it was very successful. Seven participants attended.

**Ch'an Meditation Center  
Institute of Chung-Hwa  
Buddhist Culture  
90-31 Corona Avenue  
Elmhurst, N.Y. 11373  
(718) 592-6593**

**NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
FLUSHING, N.Y.  
PERMIT NO. 1120**

**RETURN POSTAGE  
GUARANTEED**